

PULAK BISWAS — A PROFILE

-- JAYA PARAMASIVAN

"I strongly feel that illustration is an art and a good illustration should not only help one understand the text, it should go beyond that and stand on its own as a work of art," states Pulak Biswas, one of the leading illustrators of children's books in India.

Modest, unassuming and humble, Pulak was born on July 4, 1941, at Ranchi, Bihar. After finishing school, he joined the Government College of Arts and Crafts in Calcutta. It was here that he had the good fortune to meet Ananda Munshi, a commercial artist considered to be in the same class as that of Satyajit Ray and Raghunath Goswami. Munshida, as Pulak fondly refers to him, was a great source of encouragement to him. Pulak took him as his Guru in his pursuit of art. Munshi constantly encouraged him to paint landscapes for which he received an annual scholarship.

Returning to Ranchi after getting his diploma in art, Pulak was disappointed when he was offered a job as a drawing master in a school. Impatient and determined to find a better and more lucrative job to his satisfaction, he proceeded to Calcutta. Since Munshida's name was considered important

in the advertising field, he sought his help to find employment and Pulak got assignments from different advertising agencies.

Pulak faced tough times initially, trying to find his bearings in the new environment. However, he got his training as a visualiser under Munshida and started working on layouts and illustration for the publicity campaigns.

During this time, the Children's Book Trust (CBT) and the UNICEF organized a seminar of illustrators in Delhi. Pulak was selected as one of the participants. On the final day of the Seminar, late Shankar Pillai, the Executive Director of the CBT, offered him a job in the Children's Book Trust. Pulak gladly accepted it and joined the CBT in 1964. Since he was the only artist on staff in the organization, he enjoyed Shankar's full confidence.

Pulak remembers Shankar Pillai "as a great man" and considers him the "guiding spirit" in his career. He says "Shankar Pillai had a great regard for artists with inborn talents. The pay was not very much, but I liked working under him as he was non-interfering and gave great respect to our work."

Then Pulak received the UNESCO fellowship to study art at Horshey College in England and Reitvelt Academy in Amsterdam for two months each. He worked there mainly on illustrations and book designs. "I found that several reputed artists there were doing illustrations for books. In India, however, artists consider it below their dignity to do illustrations," he remarks sadly, and adds "In India, we don't think of illustrators as artists. Even if they paint well, the artists still say, 'The person does good work but he is an illustrator!'"

In 1967, ten of his illustrations were displayed at Biennale of Illustrations Bratislava (BIB '67) at Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. The same year, he was

awarded a UNESCO Fellowship for advanced studies in Graphic Designs.

Pulak left the CBT in 1968 as he felt stifled in a staid job. "In a job you have to do whatever you are asked to do, whereas I wanted to be free." Shankar Pillai was reluctant to release him, but considering the pressure of financial need Pulak was facing at that time, he allowed him to proceed to take up a more remunerative job.

"I felt very sorry to leave the CBT," says Pulak instantly, "Even now I feel so because Shankar Pillai was a man who really understood how to bring out the best in an artist". But he added, "I am made that way. When I make up my mind to do something, I do not relent easily."

In 1969, Pulak once again stepped back into advertising as a senior visualiser. In 1969, he was awarded the grand Honorary Diploma by an International Jury at the Biennale of Illustrations for an illustration from the book he had designed, *A Day in the Life of Maya of Mohenjodaro*. Soon he was given the assignment to illustrate a story from India. "The Big Quest", published in Children's Annual *Children Everywhere* by Field Enterprises, Educational Corporation, U.S.A.

Pulak worked in leading Advertising Companies from 1969 to 1981 in Delhi and Calcutta. Once again, his passion for freedom in the working environment saw him leaving the staid job and become a free-lance Graphic Designer and Illustrator working for various advertising agencies, publishers of children's books and magazines.

Pulak has received many awards in Advertising Designs (Press campaigns, Brochures, Calendars etc) from commercial Arts Guild, Bombay Advertising Club, Bombay and DAVP, New Delhi.

"Twenty year ago," says Pulak, "The word

Illustrator didn't even exist or at least denote a polite term for a commercial artist, often paid poorly and then exploited. Today, he says with satisfaction that he is sought after, and is assigned much more work than it was ever thinkable earlier.

Pulak feels that an illustrator's task is not an easy one. "His illustrations do not allow him the same freedom that an artist enjoys. An illustrator has his work predetermined before he starts work. "The size and shape of an advertisement or book are preplanned. The other limitations are the texture, medium, treatment and sometimes even the colour of the work which have to be complimentary to the text of the product.

Known as a rebel in the advertising world for his constant efforts to work with freedom, he asserts with pride, "I have always tried to break free. It has to be a continuous struggle to exploit the possibility of art in our illustrations, and after all the work I have done, I can say, I succeeded in what I wanted to do."

This comment is justified when we regard the wonderful illustrations he has done for the recently published book *Ramayana* written by Anupa Lal and published by Lustre Press. The editor-critic Vaijayanti Tonpe, Editor of *Children's World*, writes of the illustrations while reviewing the book : "They give the book its ethereal charm and raise it to a cherishable category."

Pulak lives in Delhi with his artist wife Usha and two children, Sandeep and Sonali. The artist couple have transformed a modest flat into a cool comfortable attractive abode by their excellent taste in decor. The visitors are charmed by the warm hospitality shown by their hosts.

"This is where the whole family works taking turns at the work table", grins the elegantly attired Pulak as he indicates one corner of the artistic living room which has been converted into a cosy studio in New Delhi. Sandeep, his son, is studying in the

Government Arts college, is shaping into a keen photographer and the daughter Sonali who is finishing school and is a budding artist. Pulak wants them to finish their graduation before they start concentrating on their hobbies.

"Basically, I am an artist. I had to take up advertising because there was no opening for artists," he says, displaying reverently a precious looking album containing a collection of excellent calligraphies done by Munshida.

"This was presented to me by my mentor and Guru, Munshida. You will notice that it begins with the first unfinished picture made by me," he said proudly. "He wanted me to have these precious works done by him as a memento."

Asked whether he enjoys illustrating for children's books he said, "Of course, I enjoy working for children's books. Children love illustrations in a book," he paused and added.

Illustrations in a book are lasting as they are there to stay. Whereas in advertising or any other commercial assignment they are seen, appreciated and forgotten. A painting is permanent. Even on a postage stamp it remains for ever.

Pulak feels that there is an imperative need for better awareness among the publishers to cater to the quality of illustrations in their publications.

"I wish publishers apply their mind in this context and select good illustrations instead of picking them by their low demands in payments which looks like inviting tenders in commercial contract and bidding for the low quotations ! Thus, public too, tend to become indifferent to the illustrations in books !"

Pulak also feels that there is a vital need for better interaction between publishers, writers and illustrators to make a book successful so that the artist and the author feel satisfied with a sense of achievement.

"The publishers in India have yet to learn to respect professionalism of the artists who come to them, whether they are writers or illustrators," he says, "they are too casual in their approach, often not taking in the quality of the illustrator's work. There are no Shankar Pillai's among them. "Unfortunately" he adds, "Shankar was the only man I know who respected artists' true worths and commended them for their quality of work."

Pulak feels relaxed as a freelancer. "More of freedom to express my creative urge," he says. "There is no restriction of space or time which one finds in a paid job," he remarks while showing some excellent charcoal sketches he has done of polo horses. The pictures show the exquisite fluid movement of the horses. One tends to agree with him and admire his total dedication to his work which he executes with firm determination and perfection.

Besides working as a freelancer, Pulak is also a visiting lecturer at the college of Arts, New Delhi. He has given demonstrations and talks on Illustrations and Graphic Design at the Hindu University at Varanasi, the Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi and Mass Communication, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi.

Pulak has held and participated in a number of exhibitions. All India Exhibition of Drawings, Group show at the UN Information Centre 1989, One-man show at Alliance Francaise New Delhi, Group Show Stahmat, Srishti Gallery 1990, Nelson Mandela Show at the Little Theatre Group Gallery, New Delhi 1990 - to name a few.

In the competitive world of illustrators today, Pulak stands out distinct, inspiring many artists to achieve their desired goal with determination and courage. His passion to create effective illustration in children's books will be a great boon to the young readers for many years to come.